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# Under the Kapok Tree: Explorations in Dagbon

Allegra Churchill

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**School for International Training**

**College Semester Abroad-Ghana**

**(Arts and Culture)**

**Fall 1997**

**Under the Kapok Tree: Explorations in Dagbon**

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## ABSTRACT

"Under the Kapok Tree: An Exploration in Dagbon" is the result of a month of cross-cultural research in Tamale and Yendi. Structured around the theme of the enskinment (installment) of the female chief of Gundogu, the paper seeks to elucidate the details and symbolism of this ritual, to uncover its origin and history, and to orient these findings within Dagomba society by using insights gained on the role of chieftaincy, and the role of royal-class women in the community.

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*The Perpetual Migration*

*by Marge Piercy*

*How do we know where we are going? How do we know where we are headed till we in fact or hope or hunch arrive? You can only criticize, the comfortable say, you don't know what you want. Ah, but we do.*

*. . . .*

*In my spine a tidal clock tilts and drips and the moon pulls blood from my womb. Driven as a migrating falcon, I can be blown off course yet if I turn back it feels wrong. Navigating by chart and chance and passion I will know the shape of the mountains of freedom, I will know. \_*

## INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Tamale on the night bus from Kumasi. It rumbled slowly in towards the pulsing red light of the radio tower, center of the city. Going to sleep that night I heard the muezzins pre-dawn prayers and knew I had come to an unfamiliar but deeply meaningful place. Living in Dagbon for four weeks has brought another round of culture shock after being in the south of Ghana. The currents run slower, and somehow deeper, as if even amidst the dusty streets and busy market one can feel the breadth of the baobabs, the vastness of the savanna which lies breathing beyond town and village. During my first week here I found myself bound to Yendi, traditional capital of Dagbon, to witness the enskinment of the Gundo-Naa. This is the highest skin obtainable by a woman in Dagbon, and overall is high ranking in the hierarchy of chieftaincies which comprise the powerful state. My experience there, particularly a night spent in the moonlit courtyard outside her room of seclusion, interested me in this vortex of women and traditional authority. I had come expecting to research the way dance revealed the roles of Dagomba women, or relationships with the landscape. And, throughout my stay in Dagbon, it was the beauty of the bush that both inspired and calmed me. Therefore, my thrust of inquiry is to how these themes all fit together- land, women, power. Is there perhaps a link between the fertility of the land and the fertility of women? Who are the powerful women in this society and why? I was not able to answer these questions, and this frustrates me, not because I think that there is one certain answer out there that I

am missing, but because I must leave without giving more than a passing wave at these rich topics. It is a joke to try to do research here in three weeks, especially without hearing the language. The subtleties and nuances of the certain words chosen by a speaker are missed, as are those opportunities to engage someone in conversation around the water pipe, while cooking, or on the street. Thus this paper began as a synthesis of an opportunity I took by traveling to Yendi, my need to try to sense the rhythm of life here by living with the tindana (land priestess)/chief in Katariga, and my need to structure those experiences in an academic framework rigorous yet sensitive to the fact that I know nothing about this culture. On top of this, my time was a period of intensive self questioning and growth as I strove to engage my whole self in my surroundings and my project in a manner that was moral, one that added life to each action I took. I came to realize that I had many rich, but disparate experiences, and so, late in the game, I decided to focus on the Gundo-Naa as the means by which to present the bulk of what I had experienced in an academic manner. Thus this paper should be taken with lump of salt (or a gallon of sugar if its as sour as coco), a first effort at research in an unfamiliar place, as "I came to meet it".

Going to the north of Ghana after having the focus of our program in the south brought its own unique round of difficulties, shocks and delights. The north of Ghana, including the Dagomba which comprise the second most populous ethnic group in Ghana, is underrepresented in the scholarly literature. This meant that nearly all of my information on what the most relevant issues were, how the state was organized, how the economy functioned and what the general



nature of the region is like had to come from the week of lectures and observation the SIT group had in Tamale. Therefore my proposal was not based in previous experience or even detailed research, and I feel that if I could plan to do a research project over again I would try to first have a pilot trip to the region of study in order to ascertain what the compelling issue is, or some of the factors surrounding that already defined issue. It is crucial to have close and sustained contact with local experts, which I was fortunate to find at CNC, as well as immersion in the culture and a firm grasp of the language. It would also be helpful to arrange multiple interpreters, possible informants and a tentative schedule before arrival. Although my proposal and Aziz's (my Tamale contact) work did this latter bit, it was not based on my experience and so when I arrived I realized that I needed to redefine my areas of interest. The opportunity to travel to Yendi arose and I felt that it was a significant event that I would not get to witness again, and one which would enrich my study of women's roles. After having the privilege to become more deeply involved in the history and the daily life of the Dagomba through my interactions in Yendi and Katariga the scope of my study has been broadened to explore the interactions of women's roles with many areas of life.

In order to present the information I have found Section 1 will first describe in a detailed manner the enskinment ritual of the Gundo-Naa followed by the origin and history of the Gundogu skin, including a list of past chiefs in Section 2. Section 3 will orient this event and its history first in relationship to the

role of chieftaincy in Dagomba society and Section 4 then regards the current perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about women in Dagomba society.

This study is relevant because it brings together a variety of oral history sources in one written document for the first time. For Dagomba and non-Dagomba alike some of this information is little known. Making this information accessible to a variety of people, in both the academic and non-academic worlds is important because it can then be used for the purpose of better understanding the world-view of the Dagomba. There is extremely little information written about the Dagomba, neither their state structure, economy, religious beliefs, history, gender attitudes, etc., especially as compared with the Asante, Ewe or Ga which are the other principal ethnic groups in Ghana. It also attempts to privilege the role of women. This is important because on the average, females are economically, politically and socially second-class to males. It is only by trying to understand why and how this is so that we can begin to change the situation. This attempt at revealing and analyzing these issues is crucial because without understanding the set of assumptions and beliefs that a people are coming from one cannot hope to see where we are going.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Oppong, Christine. (1973). Growing Up In Dagbon. Tema, Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.

This book is the primary reference on Dagomba society. It provides a brief overview of the state which I used, including "The Kingdom in the Past", "The

Land and the People", "The Kingship and Royalty", and "The Chief and Community". It's primary focus is how a child is raised and attains certain roles within the society such as butcher, drummer, fiddler, diviner, mallam. It has little discussion of the roles of women. She cites a number of articles which are listed in the Reference section of this paper under "Further References".

Chernoff, John Miller. (1979). *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*. Chernoff spent an intensive time in Tamale studying drumming, and he uses the musical idiom to convey not only the sensory details of Dagomba life, but their values and attitudes with remarkable clarity and vigor. He is a gifted writer, able to weave seemingly disparate sources with personal experience to create an meaningful image which is far richer than the sum of its parts, and which extends beyond the borders of Ghana or Africa. His book was exciting to read in Tamale because I found myself saying "Oh yeah, that happens to me everyday too", and it inspired me to keep trying to get deeper into Dagomba life. Now that I am writing my own paper, it is a challenge to aim for a level of scholarship that merits using his observations.

## METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned in the Introduction, I came here with a proposal to study "Dance in the Context of a Dagomba Village" with special inquiry into people's relationships to their land as expressed through dance, or the role of women as expressed through dance. What I was really interested in was the chance to live in a village and try to get a sense of the daily rhythms of life there. I hoped that studying dance would give me a way to actively participate. I hypothesized that as art is an outlet for the integral emotions and events of a person and the community, dance could serve as a key for my entrance into Dagomba society. I also anticipated using formal and informal interview techniques to research the origins of certain dances, their context, and their importance to the community.

When I arrived in Tamale, Mr. Aziz, my contact there, had made some arrangements for me to work with Jacob Fuseni as an interpreter/assistant. I also went to greet Tuya-naa Abubaigar Von Salifu at the Center for National Culture (CNC), which was suggested by several people in Legon. Chief Salifu told me that a high-ranking female chief was going to be enskinned on Friday in Yendi and that- I could accompany him there. I spent parts of Monday and Tuesday with Jacob going to a funeral and to see rice harvesting in order to start my observations of music/dance and the uses of the land. On Wednesday I learned that the enskinment had been moved to Thursday, and Chief was leaving that

evening. I went, intending to stay for two nights because I felt that it was a unique opportunity to see the Dagomba rituals and music in action. I was also excited to travel to a new place.

Before I left I arranged to stay in a village called Katariga on the outskirts of Tamale with a female tindana/chief because I hoped that since the tindana was a female and a land priestess I could gain insight into the two areas which interested me most--people's relationship with their land, and the roles of women in the society. I was assured that they also danced. Although I visited that Wednesday I did not meet the girl that they said could interpret for me. Therefore when I returned I did not bring an interpreter.

On the evening of Wednesday, November 12 I drove to Yendi with Chief Von Salifu and two research assistants- Fawei Issifu Mohammed and Abukari Saeed Iddris. They found me a place to stay with a schoolteacher at Yendi Secondary named Alberta Amponsah. In the morning we found out that the enskinment would be on Friday, but we greeted the chief and Gbanzalin his first wife. We were accompanied by Mama Yaa, an African-American storyteller from Kentucky. My experience with her was extremely intense, and I felt that she charged me with a responsibility to be wide open and to stand strong against the denigration of any individual, especially women. "The change must start with you" she impressed. My whole project became at that time secondary to my need to be wide-open in terms of letting myself get drawn wholesale into the experience of being here in Dagbon, and I was wrestling with just what my purpose of being here was. It became apparent to me I was not really invested in

dance, but dance was my purported purpose in being here. Ghanaians invariably ask a visitor their "mission" and I've learned that a thoughtfully spoken yet imprecise answer yields a more favorable reciprocation than a precise but clipped response. "Purpose [or mission] in this sense is not the resolute motivation towards a goal by which we define the term but rather is a concern for the meaningfulness of one's actions, a sense of proportion in self-awareness, and an attitude of thoughtfulness in self-expression"<sup>1</sup>. My daily purpose has been in terms of these criteria. My most frustrating moments were when I tried to force my academic concepts of a "project" into my life here, not when I maintained the mediated involvement and polyrhythmic approach to life which Chernoff says characterize the society.<sup>2</sup>

I was very excited to be in the midst of this prolonged ritual of enskinment which went through several stages. I felt at home in Yendi because Alberta and Gbanzalin were so welcoming, even though Gbanzalin and I could never really speak to one another. Then, after I had participated in some of the activities surrounding the enskinment on Friday night many of the women in town recognized me and would call "Lamisi, Lamisi"<sup>3</sup> as I passed by, or welcome me into sitting or dancing with them at the ceremonies. Furthermore, Fawei and Saeed are both from Yendi, and Fawei took me all over town to meet friends and family.

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<sup>1</sup> Chernoff (1979) p. 166

<sup>2</sup> Chernoff (1979) Ch.4

<sup>3</sup> Lamihi (Lamisi) means Thursday-born and I use it as my Dagomba name.

During the whole enskinment Fawei worked sound, and Saeed did photography, and I just tried to drink it all in. At the first ceremony on Friday I used non-participant observation, but when I felt more comfortable with my companions and the town I began to do more intensive participant observation, making sure that this participation occurred with women. However, fewer women than men are able to speak English so my conversational interactions never passed beyond Dagbani greetings except for one very brief time. On Friday during the ceremonies at the palace I felt that if I moved to take pictures I would be extremely interruptive.

On Saturday when I was sitting with the women on the floor instead of on the guests bench I was more interested in that perspective than on making my presence felt as a photographer or researcher. Being pulled up to give money to the dancers was enough time in the spotlight. I therefore gave my camera to Saeed at both of these times. By Sunday in Gundogu I felt I had enough rapport with the people involved to move rather freely about taking photos. This raises the question of how what may seem to be easy (taking pictures) or obvious (identity as a researcher) before entering a situation becomes problematic. I did not want to distract from the main proceedings. By Sunday I was a recognized face and I had also been able to sense the ways in which people moved in and out within the structure of the proceedings. There is an informality in Dagomba society which is complemented and made possible by the extreme degree of respect and deference which are ever-present.

On Tuesday I went to Katariga and stayed three nights<sup>4</sup> at the compound TICCS has built for the tindana's son Karim. The came home at six each night, and while she was friendly the translation was frustrating. However, I fortunately met the headmistress of the primary school on my first morning, and she helped me to conduct interviews with Karim each morning. Besides observing life in and around the tindana's compound (including making shea butter) I went to farm rice, and to a neighboring village to call on the tindana's senior sister. I felt that I had just begun to feel comfortable there when I had to leave.

I returned to Yendi on the weekend (November 22-23) with Fawei and Saeed as they conducted a follow-up interview with Abdel Samed, their principal informant. I hoped that by returning to Yendi with them that I could in some small way show that I wanted to be part of their research for CNC on the enskinment of the Gundo-Naa. They had gathered a wealth of information, and were willing to share it with me, but I did not want to just take their whole research and write it. I am extremely indebted to them both, and indeed most of the credit should go to them because they taped everything, and Fawei sat with me interpreting the interviews with Samed and some of the music line by line from the tapes. I hope that I can give some small assistance to them by adding an outside perspective and a written account of the enskinment.

When I realized in Katariga that my study of dance was not progressing I tried to focus on relationships to the land. Even when I returned to Yendi for the interview on the 22nd, I asked Mr. Samed my own set of questions about

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<sup>4</sup> My schedule and lodging is in the Appendix.



tindanas. On this tact I seemed frustrated at every turn. After reviewing all of my material I realized that I had more information about women in positions of power than any other focus concerning dance or land. Therefore my second visit to Katariga was to try to obtain more information on the tindana's responsibilities and role as the leader of the village, and the role Karim played. I planned to use both the Katariga tindana and the Gundo-Naa as examples to speak about how women traditionally obtain and use positions of authority in Dagbon and how they are generally perceived. After receiving negligible information in Katariga (the tindana would not talk), and my experience in Gundogu (including the wealth of history from Alhaji), I have shifted the emphasis away from Katariga and towards the Gundo-Naa.

I went back to Yendi again on Saturday, November 30 after I had decided finally to focus on women and traditional authority. I intended to interview the Gundo-Naa and a drummer that I had been referred to. That morning Fawei and I got bicycles and went to Gundogu (a 20 minute ride down a rough car track). I immediately realized that this is where I should have been for the last three weeks. We greeted the Gundo-Naa, and talked for some time. Fawei asked if I could stay for the night and with the usual Ghanaian/Dagomba hospitality they agreed. I had previously arranged for an interpreter, Serena, in Yendi so I was able to speak with the Gundo-Naa that evening about her responsibilities and opinions about her new role. Serena returned to Tamale the next day, but I decided to stay for two more nights. I used the days to conduct the interviews with Alhaji

Mahama Seidu and Nawona Yakuba, the oldest drummer, on the history of the Gundogu skin. On my second night in the village there was *simpa* (recreational dance), and I really regretted that I had not come to Gundogu and Yendi for my whole ISP time, because it would have afforded the opportunity to become immersed in Dagomba life more fully (perhaps to even have done my original proposal), and to make deeper inquiries into the history and context of the Gundogu skin. In Gundogu I felt finally like I had arrived where I wanted to be the entire semester.

Throughout my studies I used participant observation and formal interviews as my main types of inquiry. The rituals which Fawei, Saeed and I observed in Yendi provided the basis for further questions, and led us to the formal interviews that were conducted in Yendi. Here I must stress that the details of the enskinment rituals were all uncovered by Fawei and Saeed. It is not my own work, and it is all previously known in oral histories. The part of this which was done most on my own was the history. Formal interviews in Katariga also provided a lot of interesting, but not altogether relevant, bits of information<sup>5</sup>. I also feel that every day here I gained a new perspective just by talking informally with Fawei, Charity, Serena, Aziz and others, and observing the flow of life.

What emerges in these following pages is such a distillation of my experience that I know it does not do justice to the full flavor of my time here.

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<sup>5</sup> Such as the fact that there are burial mounds of *tindanas* outside the village where one cannot go at night.

How or where do I explain the satisfaction of dozing off in the tindana's courtyard under the stars, the discomfort of a hot, bumpy, dusty bus ride with an aching head and stomach, the glee of finally climbing a termite mound? These were the moments when I realized that I was really living, and was perfectly happy exactly where I was. Now that I am preparing to leave Tamale and Ghana I realize that I will truly miss so many things here- from kulikuli and beancakes to the white birds which flock in the rice fields and the goats who prance in the street. Most significantly I will miss all of the people who made my stay here not only bearable, but enjoyable and meaningful. There were afternoons when all I wanted to do was cry with loneliness, frustration, self-doubt. Invariably though, I would go out to face the world again and it was at these junctures, when I let go of my expectations or need to control the situation, that I was able to appreciate fully the warmth of the people here and the fact that I had truly arrived in place with many lessons to offer me. When I would properly greet the seller of oranges, the shopkeeper, schoolchildren, construction workers and the passing bicyclist I was alive. The Dagomba think it extremely rude not to greet. It means that you don't see them, you are not acknowledging their dignity and humanity. And if you cannot see the person next to you, why should they see you? Chernoff explains that "we [Westerners] often tend to see social conventions as limiting to our freedom. In an African context, interpersonal intimacy is achieved not through the elimination of social conventions but through the effective integration of as many social formalities as possible"<sup>6</sup>. With greetings this means

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<sup>6</sup> Chernoff (1979) p.160

at least two lines of exchange, and indeed a bond is formed in the interim. The amazing hospitality, helpfulness and kindness of the people I have met here forces me to look inside of myself and be worthy of their actions. This is no easy nor brief task, but a lifelong act. All of the people who have told me "You are invited" to eat, to stay, to work with them have given me their best, and I fervently hope that I do not fail to give them my best in return.

## SECTION 1: THE RITUAL OF ENSKINMENT

Enskinment is the ritual process by which a person is made a chief. In Dagomba society there is a vast hierarchy of chieftaincies centered in the traditional capital of Yendi. The king, Yaa-Naa, is known as the "Lion of Dagbon". The Yaa-Naa is descended from the mythical figure of Tohajie, the Red Hunter, and his grandson Naa Gbewaa who settled at Pusiga near Bawku as part of a migration possibly from Zamfara, a Hausa state in Nigeria north of Borgu<sup>7</sup>. The Mossi, Mamprusi, and Nanumba royalty share Naa Gbewaa as a common ancestor and are considered cousins of the Dagomba. Oppong (1973) states that the Dagbon state is comprised of three "estates" melded together- the royalty who are descendants of the invaders who came over 400 years ago; the Muslims who come from Wangara and Hausa roots; and the autochthones or indigenous people whom she classes as the "commoners"<sup>8</sup>. The tindanas (land priests) represent the indigenous system of organization, and many of the

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<sup>7</sup> Staniland (1975) p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Oppong (1973) p. 13

tindanas were slaughtered and replaced by royal chiefs (or chiefs married their daughters) to form the kingdom<sup>9</sup>.

There are three divisional chieftaincies reserved for sons of past YaaNaa s which are Mion, Savelugu and Karaga. These serve as gates to the Yendi skin. Under the divisional chieftaincies are further tiers of chiefs and sub chiefs, some of which are specially reserved for sons or grandsons of a YaaNaa. Each chief is surrounded by elders with titles and duties which mirror that of the Yaa-Naa s elders. Some chieftaincies are terminus chieftaincies which mean that once a person attains that skin, gbon, they can advance no further<sup>10</sup>.

The Gundogu skin is the women s equivalent of the Yendi skin, and indeed she is the only chief able to veto the Yaa-Naa s word. Royal women, Nabriponsi, fall into two categories- Yaa-Naa s daughters who can compete for Gundo-Naa, and granddaughters whose limit is Kpatu-Naa. The daughters line (Ya-na-bipunsi-nama) starts with Kulugu, then the Kpatuya skin which serves as the gate to Gundog<sup>11</sup>. Staniland adds Yimahego and Sasagele to this line<sup>12</sup>. The granddaughters (Paga-bihe-nama) can compete for Shillong and Yimahigu<sup>13</sup>. The daughters of a Shillin-Naa can vie for Fiyaa, which is held by a man and a

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<sup>9</sup> Samed, 23 Nov 97 interview. Tindanas powers are on the decrease due to the modernization (including the rise of Christianity and Islam) in Dagomba society. Chieftaincy is becoming more of a business negotiation, and so in the western part of Dagbon where chieftaincy and tindanaship were commonly combined the tindanaship is taking a definite backseat. For example many of the chiefs are appointed rather than possessed by spirits. Staniland (1975 p.4) also notes that the surviving institution of the tindanas after invasion may have helped the creation of a federal structure instead of a more centralized government.

<sup>10</sup> Oppong (1973) p. 20 "

<sup>11</sup> Samed 23 Nov 97 interview ,

<sup>12</sup> Staniland (1975) p. 25

<sup>13</sup> Samed 23 Nov 97 interview

woman in alternate succession. Yimahegu also alternates in this way. According to Mr. Samed there are a "great many" additional villages ruled by women, most of whom were enskinned by Yaa-Naa. The divisional chiefs at Sunsong and Karaga and the Yulezohelanaa all have some within their territories. Those named were Gaa, Duli and Nantong. Mr. Samed also noted that if you are Kpatu-Naa you hope that the Gundo-Naa will die so you can be elevated, just as the chiefs of Karaga, Mion and Savelugu are secretly waiting for the Yaa-Naa to die<sup>14</sup>.

The enskinment starts when the Kpatu-Naa is arrested, *biyi gbaago*, by the kingmakers Kuga-naa (the leader), Tugrinam, Gomli, Kpatihi-naa, Gagbunlana. They are assisted by the Zohe-naa who is senior to all the kingmakers, Mali, and Gukpenaa who assists when a Yaa-naa will be enskinned<sup>15</sup>. Each kingmaker has one item of regalia in his possession. Thus the kingmakers assemble with the regalia and arrest the Kpatu-naa at Kpahiguyili. This is normally done around 11 o'clock at night, with only shea butter lamps or, in this case moonlight, to brighten the way. Surrounded by the kingmakers the future Gundo-naa moves slowly towards the Katiniduu, the compound where Yaa-naa's are buried, and which contains a certain room where she will be secluded for the night. As she goes she says "N' ku tooi li" (I cannot do it), meaning that the task they have given her is a heavy burden and she cannot shoulder the responsibility. The kingmakers reply that "Your ancestors will help

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<sup>14</sup> Samed 23 Nov 97 interview

<sup>15</sup> Samed, 23 Nov 97 interview. When Tamale was made capital of the Northern Region the British wanted the Yaa-Naa to move there. He refused but sent the Gukpenaa as a deputy.

you rule"; an affirmation that your grandfathers and grandmothers will assist you, as they did this and left the skin for you in turn<sup>16</sup>. It is only when a chief is being enskinned in a terminus skin that she or he is secluded in the Katiniduu for the night.

At this time a crowd was gathered outside the compound, elders under the mango tree, Yaa-naa's wives going about their business. I sat with Gbonzali and Fawei outside Gbonzalin's compound, waiting for the lights to come on which was the signal that people could go in and greet her. At the Katiniduu she is bathed and each kingmaker clothes her with his piece of regalia- smock, robe, sandals and hat. Then she is tutored. Chiefs used to be secluded and tutored for longer periods of time<sup>17</sup>. This time the lights were turned on after roughly an hour, and immediately people rushed into the courtyard, accompanied by the gonji players, who took up position for the rest of the night inside the courtyard. Chief Von Salifu and Fawei could not go into the Katiniduu as they are both eligible for further enskinment and if they went in they could be trapped by the "African electronics". While I was outside I saw some men cutting up a cow that had been slaughtered as sacrifice which was later added to the stew I ate.

I went into the courtyard where there was over 75 women dancing to the gonji music, sitting and talking, sleeping, and cooking a huge pot of tuo zaafi. A crowd was pressed against the doorway of the room where the Gundo-naa was

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<sup>16</sup> Samed 23 Nov 97 interview

and they went in by twos or threes to greet her. Before long some of the ladies came took me to greet the Gundo-naa. I held some coins and 1000 cedi note tightly in my hand. I was pushed through the doorway and I murmured "Aninwola, Naa, Naa, Naa" as I squatted and tried to take in the loud and flustered scene. The Gundo-Naa sat to the left of the doorway, propped on cushions and skins. She was dressed in a cream woven cloth with the special yellow hat which covers her ears and a cream head wrap over it (see photo 4). It is very hot in the room and two women were massaging her arms and back. Some men were playing a game on the floor which resembled a large tic-tac-toe game. This game is organized by Kuga-naa's people in order to entertain her<sup>18</sup>. She must stay awake in order to prove that she is ready and able to serve her people at any hour. I gave the players some coins and the money to another man, the Gundo- naa smiled at me, and I was pulled out again. Then the women got me to dance. I had come back to sit on the mat with them and they went and found the gonji players who came over and played invitingly to me. When I got up to dance a crowd immediately rushed over and began ululating, while others slapped coins on my head. We were all laughing as I tried to imitate their movements. After a few moments, I gave the coins which I had managed to catch to the musicians and returned to my seat on the mat. I stayed in the courtyard for a few hours, relaxing on the mat watching the women stir the tuo zaafi and occasionally going to give money to the women dancing. Once I had participated by greeting the Gundo-Naa and by dancing I was free more or less

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<sup>18</sup> Abdel Samed



to melt into the scene and observe. The moon had risen earlier, and the glow of its fullness made any lamps unnecessary. When the tuo zaafi was ready three calabashes were prepared for the ancestors<sup>19</sup>, and then innumerable bowls were filled for everyone else. I was invited to eat by five women whose mat I was sharing. The tuo zaafi was hot, and one of them kindly broke chunks off to cool for me. This was one high point of my ISP experience. I was in the midst of a huge party, under a full moon, sharing food with women whom others feared for their strong juju<sup>20</sup>, and I was happy just to be there observing it all. I felt the serenity that comes from security of place, purpose, and peace of mind and so it was not just detached observation. By participating actively I had become an acting member of the event, given rein to act on my own because I had shown that I was capable and willing to move within the parameters of the event and the role of those whom I joined. Chernoff writes that "in an African context, such as a musical event, individuality is related to participation, and in the complex relationships of an African community context, character is understood as a sense of one's relationships with others, as a continuing style of involvement and making do, and hence as a focus for moral judgements"<sup>21</sup>. Once I participated I could be perceived as a person like themselves and treated as such (as opposed to a stranger). As I continued my relationship with them over the next

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<sup>19</sup> Fawei's observation

<sup>20</sup> I use the term "juju" because that is the term repeatedly given to me in translation. I do not mean it in any derogatory manner, but only to describe the mysterious powers which certain people, usually old women or women from powerful families, possess. These powers were never fully described to me. The euphemism "African electronics" is given for the same mysterious powers.

<sup>21</sup> Chernoff (1999) p. 166

two days and two weeks (albeit sporadically and rather superficially) they came to have trust in my character because I was willing to involve myself fully in their expression of community. At 3:30 am I went outside to listen to the gon-gon beaters who were singing praise songs of the Gundo-Naa's ancestors. I then walked home with Fawei, the moon so bright that even unaccustomed to the rocky paths I did not trip<sup>22</sup>.

In the morning, while the Gundo-naa is still secluded someone will be made Kpatu-naa. She is brought from the courtyard of the Katini compound to the chief's palace where the Yaa- naa is sitting in state and a crowd is gathered. Royal daughters and granddaughters also precede her carrying sticks, yodoya. There were three and used to be more but they were burned in the ethnic conflict of 1994. A large crowd follows her, shouting praises. I came out with this crowd and then waited on the king's pavilion for the Gundo-naa to come. The Kpatunaa does not greet the Yaa-naa. After she is seated the kingmakers bring the Gundo-naa out. They come to the Yaa-naa amid much drumming and ululation. She is preceded by the kingmaker Gomli who stops along the way and says "I am hungry, there is no food"<sup>23</sup>. This means that all of her relatives should come out with money. He can stop multiple times in the procession. The yodoya precede her, each representing a past Gundo-naa since a new one is cut by M'banaa when she is enskinned. Thus there should be many, many sticks but only 8 sticks remain after the Komkumba burnt Gundogu in 1994. Tugrinam

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<sup>22</sup> I am angry at myself that I did not stay out all night, but not unbearably so because of the serenity I felt.

<sup>23</sup> Abdel Samed

carries three spears tied together from the Katiniduu to the palace, and then to Gundogu. Then they are returned to Yendi. The Gundo-naa is seated in front of the Kpatu-naa, to the left of the Yaa-naa. The Yaa-naa's linguist greets the Gundo-naa, then the Kpatu-naa, and then sends kola to them. The Kpatu-naa's linguist receives the kola. It is a mark of the status of the Gundogu skin that the Yaa-naa must send the kola to her, instead of her squatting in front of him. The same respect is given to Savelugu, Karaga and Mion. Then the drummers praise the Yaa-naa because he is the overall king, followed by praises for the Gundonaa and Kpatu-naa. The queens then move to Gbonzalin's house to greet her. The Gundo-naa, accompanied by the Kpatu-Naa, goes to N'ba Dugu's house where he washes both of her feet. After this the Kpatu-naa goes to Kpahiguylli where Kpahigu washes one her feet because she can still advance to a higher skin. Then music is played and everyone disperses.

The Gundo-naa chooses a day, in this case Sunday 16 Nov, to leave for Gundogu which is two to three miles outside of Yendi. I went to greet her Sunday morning, and again there were many women in the courtyard of N'ba Dugu. They recognized me from the day before and welcomed me to join them in the procession which wends its way on a path out through the bush to Gundogu. The chief rides a horse, and is preceded by women carrying her belongings, and her symbolic wife the Komiana (water carrier) who holds a brass pan containing a calabash, special slippers and a water jug. The gonji players and elders are also all present, making a very lively and swift procession through the bush.

When we reached the outskirts of Gundogu all the villagers were gathered with spears, guns, pounding sticks, cutlasses and the like, and they rushed at us with a roar and fire of guns. We halted, and M'banaa asked the mission of the Gundo-naa. She replied, through M'ba Dugu that she has come from the Yaanaa, in peace, to live with them. He then asks what she has brought. She replies that she brings a hoe in order to farm and raise food, a hen coop, nosugu, signifying that she is settling with fowls, and a third item. M'banaa accepts her on behalf of the village saying 'If you are coming with these items then you are welcome. The whole crowd cheers and dances towards his house. At this house he offers her water in a calabash and pours libation, and then all go to the linguists house. At the linguist's house, Wulanaaylli they ask the mission again. The Imam offers prayer and there is drumming in praise of her ancestors. M'ba Dugu spoke, saying that the Yaa-naa had asked him to bring her to Gundogu to stay with them. He says that the task which the Yaa-Naa has appropriated to her is large, and all should work together, with the help of God, to fulfill her duties. He adds that the Gundo-Naa must listen to what advice people give her and the news they bring, and the village should also know what is happening inside the chief's room.

Then they go to the house she is staying in now where she greets everyone again. All along the way the gonji music was played and people were shouting "*Katchagu*"! Guinea Corn Harvest! and "*Nom katin meama*" which means "Walk slowly for the ground to be wet" or "Walk lightly for there to be

peace"<sup>24</sup>. They also praise her ancestors saying "Daughter of Gbewaa" or "Granddaughter of Sumani, step mildly for the ground to be cool". The gonji players lace their praise singing with Hausa proverbs to make the music more interesting such as Rago yaa chi magani, ai magani yaa bata meaning "If a purposeless or weak person acquires juju, the potency of the juju will be reduced" Another one means "Aload meant for a camel should only be carried by a camel"-- Kaaya raa kumi, ai vakuumi chei dooka<sup>25</sup>.

## SECTION II: HISTORY OF THE GUNDOGU SKIN

Kinship is the key to the chieftaincy in Dagomba society. Nukunya (1992) explains that "The kinship system prescribes statuses and roles to people who are in particular relationships"<sup>26</sup>. The Gundo-Naa must be the daughter of a past Yaa-Naa. The present one is the daughter of Yaa-Naa Mahama, and the aunt of the present Yaa-Naa Andani Yakuba<sup>27</sup>. Since chiefs often assume new names when they are enskinned, and sometimes have a Muslim name and a day name as well as a given name, there is some added confusion. This is by no means a complete list because there were said to be over 30 yodoya before they were

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<sup>24</sup> maama= wet; cool; peace

<sup>25</sup> translation Fawei Issifu

<sup>26</sup> Nukunya (1992) p 11

<sup>27</sup> Yaa-Naa Mahama's father was Yaa-Naa Yakuba who serves as a common ancestor to the current Kpatu-Naa. Yakuba's son Yaa-Naa Abdulai had a son Yaa-Naa Alhassan who had a son Naa Budu, father to the Kpatu-Naa. I obtained the history of the Gundo-naa in pieces. While informants gave disparate early ancestors, the most recent were cited by all four of my sources. My sources were an interview with Nawona Yakuba, chief drummer in Yendi; Alhaji Mahama Seidu; Abdel Samed the "encyclopedia of Yendi history", and the Gundogu elders.

burnt in 1994<sup>28</sup>. Please see Table 1: Comparative lists of former Gundo-Naa's.<sup>29</sup>

When I went to the drummers and Alhaji for information I was told I had to provide enough Kola money so that they could sacrifice a fowl to appease the ancestors for mentioning their names. I still did not get the early ones, nor Fatim Chichere on the list from Nawona Yakubu. Alhaji said that he could tell me because he was Muslim so he was not affected by the spirits. He explained the drummer's position "they are women [you want to know about] so they won't tell about it because they fear women. They need to shed blood or else the juju will get them"<sup>30</sup>. Then he decided that he better slaughter a fowl as well. The story of Fatim Chichere was left out, he said, because her father was not a Yaa-Naa in the true sense. During the war with the Basiris oracles said that a son of the YaaNaa had to kill himself for success in war. No one volunteered, except for the Sagnarugu chief who was not a son. He stipulated that because he was offering himself for the good of the nation, his children should be considered sons and daughters of the Yaa-Naa so that they could compete for Yendi and Gundogu. Origin of the Gundo-Naa:

Alhaji Mahama Seidu told me this story of how the Gundo-naa originated. Naa Gbewaa had a daughter who was the first Gundo-naa. (However, he had earlier said that the first Gundo-naa was Namkuluma, daughter of Naa Zengina). The way that this came to be is the following. Naa Gbewaa was about

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<sup>28</sup> Samed 23 Nov 1997 interview

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<sup>30</sup> Alhaji Mahama Seidu 2 Dec 97, translation Mohammed

to die and his first son was called Zhirli. However, Naa Gbewaa had another son named Kofugu, whose mother was the favorite of Naa Gbewaa. Naa Gbewaa called the mother to him and told her that after his death that Kofugu should be chief. But Kofugu's mother was wicked towards the other children in the palace and these children told Zhirli's mother to come and hear what the father had said. Zhirli's mother told Zhirli, who told them to call Kofugu to him. Meanwhile Zhirli dug a large pit and poured boiling water inside, and put the skin over the pit. When Kofugu came Zhirli told him that the father was going to make him chief and that he should therefore sit on the skin. Kofugu sat and fell inside the pit and died. Naa Gbewaa came to hear of what had happened, and after he heard the story he vanished, and no one knows where his grave is. They took the skins and Kofugu's sister sat on the Yendi skin. But Zhirli made some sound "Voom, voom, voom" that war was coming, and when the sister heard the sound she feared (because women are afraid<sup>31</sup>) and she ran to a kapok tree in Gundogu<sup>32</sup>. So Zhirli came to sit on the Yendi skin as chief, and gave Gundogu to his sister.

Staniland says that Zhirli (Zirile) was the eldest of Naa Gbewaa's children, and that he succeeded him at Pusiga. Sitobu, another son, established the Dagomba dynasty, which under his son Nyagse conquered much of the present western Dagbon. The offspring of Yantaure, a daughter of Naa Gbewaa,

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<sup>31</sup> This was said by the interpreter, Alhaji's son Mohammed, and I'm not sure if it is his comment or his father's, but it is significant as it corroborates with many other such comments made informally elsewhere.

<sup>32</sup> Guna= kapok tree

established the Mossi in Ougadougou<sup>33</sup>. This gives some conflicting information to Alhaji's story, unless Alhaji's story really takes place at the time of Naa Zangina because it was not until Nyagse that the capital was at Yendi. However, this story could be interpreted as the story of how Zhirli inherited the skin and the other children, including the daughter, were forced to move away and establish their own skins.

Aziz told a different story<sup>34</sup>.

The original Gundo-Naa was where women chieftaincies started, in the Naa Gbewaa period. There was a lion disturbing people and Naa Gbewaa killed the lion [Gbewaa= lion. The lion is the symbol of the Yaa-Naa because of this exploit]. A lady rushed out and ululated and Gbewaa was so impressed with her that he gave her money and made her his wife. He also gave her land and told her to go and settle there.

Namkulma's Powers:

Namkuluma was Gundo-naa for a long time, and she was at the earliest time when Gundogu was a large village (1780's)<sup>35</sup>. She was the daughter of Yaa Naa Zengina. Anytime that there was a witch in the nearby villages or in Gushigu or Karaga she would set an invisible net to trap them. If there was a witch at Gushigu she would cast the net out and catch the witch like a fish and bring her to Gundogu. When she throws the net she will say to the family of the witch that

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<sup>33</sup> staniland (1975) P 4

<sup>34</sup> Aziz 25 Nov 97 interview

<sup>35</sup> date estimate by Alhaji's son Mohammed



if they haven't seen their old lady then she is with her in Gundogu and they should come for her. When they came she would ask them to pay some money to her before taking the old lady back. When they paid she would tell them that the old lady will never be a witch again because she has removed all the juju so the lady will not kill anyone again.

Also at this time men often captured wives from their husbands house. Then the husband would make juju and kill the man who had taken his wife. This killing was done by sending a snake or bees or a lion. The man who stole the wife would go to Namkuluma and get juju to protect himself. The Gundo-naa's eldest son was Yaa-naa Sala Zimbilim. He gave his daughter Awaa to the Gundo-naa. She became chief at Fuya near Tamale, and because she had been raised by Namkuluma she had strong powers. One time there was another chief at Deyali who died, and Fuya-naa Awaa sent her granddaughter to the funeral. When she was there the granddaughter did whatever she liked and disturbed the witches there who said she was too proud. With their "African electronics" they imprisoned her in a calabash to kill her the next day. However, the grandmother at Fuyacould see everything that was happening. She took the Fuya kapok and tied it to the Deyali kapok (about 30 miles away) and climbed from Fuya to Deyali in the "twinkle of an eye". The Deyali-naa's eldest son saw her arrive and started clapping (to show respect). She told him not to worry because she had not come for him but for the people inside. She entered the compound and saw the old ladies who had captured her granddaughter. She killed them each with a knock and removed her

granddaughter from the calabash and told her to do whatever she liked. The people there were afraid of the granddaughter.

Gundo-naa Namkuluma's burial site is now a shrine with a spirit. No one can go there. Sebiri's Political Intrigue:

Yaa-Naa Yakuba and Gundo-Naa Sebiri had the same father-- Yaa-Naa Andani Gbembarga. Their cousin was Yaa-Naa Mahami, whose father was YaaNaa Zibilim Bamdamda<sup>36</sup>. Zibilim and Andani Gbembarga have the same father. After Mahami died the elders chose his junior brother Tampinkargo Bukari to be Yaa-naa. Gundo-naa Sebiri said NO, because the chieftaincy should go to Andani's family since Mahami was from Zibilim's family. The second eldest of Andani's children was Sebiri's brother Zabilim Kulunku who was then Karaga chief. Sebiri went to him and said "God has created you a man and created I a woman so just remove your penis and collect my vagina and I will be a man and you will be a woman, so I can fight for my father's family. We are Yaa-Naa Andani Gbembarga's children and Yaa-Naa Zibilim Bamdamba's children have become Yaa-Naa and we Andani's children are sitting here without becoming Yaa-Naa's". When Kulunku heard this he became very angry and aggressive and could not eat. He told his drummer to call the family of Andani to him. When they were assembled Kulunku told them to prepare for war against Zibilim's family. They were to enskin the new Yaa-Naa Tampinkargo Bukari the next

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<sup>36</sup> Bamdamda is the name of the beat that the gon-gon beaters play for the Gundo-Naa and Kpatu-Naa as they process from Katinlylli to the palace.

morning, so early the next morning all of Andani's family gathered at the palace and started a war with Zibilim's family who had come to enskin the new chief. Zibilim's family all ran away, except a grandson named Semani Zole. Kulunku became Yaa-naa and gave Karaga skin to Semani Zole. After the death of Kulunku, Semani Zole became Yaa-Naa.

This did not make Sebiri very happy. Her sister was Kpatu-Naa Ashetu. Ashetu's eldest son was Yelezule Lanaa Lafu. Therefore his uncle was Yakuba, a junior brother to Sebiri, Ashetu and Kulunku. Gundo- Naa Sebiri repeated the tactics she had used with Kulunku, asking Lafu "Why is it that Sumani Zole from Zibilim's family is Yaa-Naa and your uncle is only Mion-Naa"? She told him to make war against Semani in order to make Yakuba the Yaa-Naa. Lafu replied that what she was asking him to do would separate the family, but he would do what she asked. Lafu sent word to Yakuba and they prepared war against Semani. Meanwhile Semani was also preparing to cut off Yakuba's head. Gundo-Naa Sebiri went with her brothers and their eldest sons to call Semani with the drums. He came and Lafu cut off his head and Yakuba became YaaNaa. All of this was caused by Sebiri, the eldest of them all.

## SECTION 111

### **"Coolness" and the pressures of chieftaincy**

Robert F. Thompson, in an essay on sculpture<sup>37</sup>, writes that the Yoruba "value power and command (ashe), composure (itutu), and character (iwa). Composure is essential to grant focus and restraint to power, and character assures that power accrues to the benefit of mankind". These principles which Thompson recognizes in the Yoruba are also important for the Dagomba. The composure of the Gundo-Naa is clearly evident in her careful bearing and proper etiquette (see Photo 3) as well as in the calmness of the Katariga tindana. When I went into the Katiniduu, and when I met the Gundo-Naa again later, I was surprised when she smiled at me because she first appeared so aloof. Similarly, her character is expressed when she testifies that she assumes the role of Gundo-Naa because it is a family responsibility which was "forced" on her, and one she owes to the sweat of her mothers. She is expressing a character which will ensure that her actions benefit the community as well as her own person. The prayers offered by the Imam, and the speech by M'baDugu urging the village to accept her also highlight this relationship of command, wisdom and reciprocal responsibility.

The Gundo-Naa is usually the seniormost of the eligible women (daughters of past Yaa-Naa's). Age brings wisdom and what Chernoff terms "coolness" (the ability to add one's own rhythm in a way which enhances the many other rhythms around you), and it is this which makes a chief command respect. Because respect of this sort is not as commonly given to women as men, I believe that one of the reasons a Gundo-Naa is always so old is because

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<sup>37</sup> "Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA" (1971) cited in Chernoff (1973) p.169

they are not seen as possessing the necessary "coolness" unless they age. The same argument could be advanced for a male chief, but Yaa-naa's and other male chiefs are commonly enskinned as young (or younger) men while the Gundo-Naa is always past menopause<sup>38</sup>. Alhaji's origin story is notable for the fact that the sister ran away from the Yendi skin because she was afraid. Mohammed, the son of Alhaji, who was interpreting for me added the comment that "women are afraid". This is what I was also told in Katariga by Karim and my interpreter Charity. Women are said to have more sympathy than men, but men have the strong or brave heart which does not frighten, and it is this which is needed to lead. Dolphyne records that it is not unusual to hear professional women, referred to as what may be translated as "'woman-man' or 'a-womanlike-a-man', and this, not in any derogatory terms, but with admiration"<sup>39</sup>. Why is it that the part which is termed successful is termed male? In Katariga Karim acts as head of the family and does almost all of the duties of the chieftaincy which in name belongs to his mother. His following explanation serves to help explain why men are the head of the family." Whoever the head of a family is feels pressure. Only the men have a strong heart, more than women"<sup>40</sup>. Karim explained that a chief receives praise if the place is well, but when things go wrong everyone points to them. "If someone sleeps well, she's the one, if not, she's the one [they point to]". Therefore the chief is subject to much pressure. I

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<sup>38</sup> staniland (1975) p. 26

<sup>39</sup> Dolphyne (1991) p. 43

<sup>40</sup> Karim, 28 Nov 97. translation Charity

wished to ask her about it, but was told she would become very upset. "We women, we fear pressure" Charity added.

The Gundo-Naa is also under a lot of pressure. Her senior sister was first chosen as Gundo-Naa but she ran away rather than take on the assigned role. Abiba herself rationalizes that she has a certain responsibility to be Gundo-Naa. "My father was Yaa-Naa, and I saw how my mothers suffered getting firewood, grinding corn with a stone, fetching water, cooking huge pots of tuo zaafi like at the enskinment. They suffered in this way so I have to make their suffering be for some reason. So I can't run away from being Gundo-Naa"<sup>41</sup>. She later emphasized the fact that she took the responsibility of being Gundo- Naa because the position runs in the family. The pressure, responsibility and assistance of the family is ritualized in the Gundo-Naa's enskinment as she moves from the Kpatihlyili to the Katiniduu. She says that she cannot bear the responsibility, and the elders reply that her ancestors bore it and will help her. Further mention of the heavy burdens which come with chieftaincy come when M'baDugu asks the village to help her.

Extended family is the modus operandi of the politics, economy, and social fabric of life in Dagbon. The chieftaincy is no exception. It is primarily an institution dominated by a family, whose dirty laundry is aired each time a new Yaa-Naa or a high-ranking chief must be chosen. But then, once the inter-family warring stops, the winners are perpetually remembered in dance and song.

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<sup>41</sup> Abiba. 29 Nov 97. translation Sirina

When looking at the names of these rhythms<sup>42</sup>, the proverbs and the appellations of the Gundo-Naa which were played triumphantly at Gundogu, we can see that they serve to advise chiefs and the people about some of the pitfalls of power, the grace and magnanimity which a ruler should have, and the way that one person to be regarded higher than another. Tipariga, "unwanted tree" was the name of Naa Abilai's son. It signifies that sometimes one unwanted tree may grow in the midst of a sacred grove, but it cannot be cut. This reminds us that even if you wish to do something you must be prudent and may not be able to just do what you wish because God's will is otherwise. Another rhythm with similar meaning is "A fool has big shorts", jaguzempeto, It was the name of another chief called Simala and means that "somebody wanted it but he has not been given it". Generosity is encouraged by playing "A dam where people will drink", kulnoli, which was the name taken by another of Naa Abila's royal grandsons. A similar proverb reminds that or "A river with sweet water attracts many people to drink from it". The proverb that "The fig tree does not mind the kapok tree because God made them both" and the Hausa one about the camel which is played by the gonji players tell us that unequal status is alright<sup>43</sup>.

The chieftaincy represents the entire community, but the community can only continue their allegiance if they believe in the permanence of the institution as it is through music as well as daily politics "An African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is an axis of their political

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<sup>42</sup> Nakohna 17 Nov 97 interview; translation and additions by Jacob Fuseni

<sup>43</sup> Issifu 13 Nov 97

relations, the symbol of their unity and exclusiveness, and the embodiment of their essential values" write Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940)<sup>44</sup>. The sense of collective history instilled through the permanence and importance of the chieftaincies gives the Dagomba identity and pride. This is evident in the recent ethnic conflict of 1994 which pitted Dagomba spirit against Konkumba. The permanence and status of chieftaincy is renewed with public rituals like the enskinment. "Formalities provide a means of setting people's involvements into patterns of communication which have precedents and continuity and which thus extend meaning" explains Chernoff (1979)<sup>45</sup>. In the case of the Dagomba, these rituals provide a way of merging the interests of its three estates-- the indigenous people, the invading royalty, and the immigrant Muslim/Hausa. When the villagers of Gundogu rushed out to halt the chief on the outskirts of their land, they demanded the mission of the chief. She replied that she was coming in peace, to farm the land. They then accept her as part of their village. Later, the villagers and the chief are urged to work together for mutual benefit. This may serve as an alternative allegory of Dagomba history, which by stressing the peaceful nature of the chief's invasion speaks about the ties which have been forged between the "commoners" and the royals. It also warns the chiefs that they must respect the actions and ideas of their neighbors if they are to prosper and succeed. The Muslim influence on the Dagombas is also evident in the ceremonies. Naa Zengina was the first Yaa-Naa to add Muslim prayers to his

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<sup>44</sup> Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) cited in Arens and Karp (1989) p.xvii

<sup>45</sup> Chernoff (1979) p.161



enskinment ceremony in 1700. Since then Islamic influence has continued to grow in Dagbon.

### **The Continuity of Reciprocate Relationships**

Thompson also writes in the same essay that "To be generous in a beautiful way seems the essence of morality and the assurance of continuity"<sup>46</sup>. The offering of kola is one such gracious gesture which symbolizes the extreme respect which characterizes the moral universe of the Dagomba. A visitor brings kola (either the actual kola or money) in order to show that she or he appreciates the time and character of the chief or elder she is visiting. In return the chief offers the visitor kola to welcome her. When the Yaa-Naa sends kola to the Gundo-Naa instead of having her fetch it this reverses the usual relationship between the Yaa-Naa and his subject. It publicly shows that the Gundo-Naa's status is very high and the degree of respect and trust which the Yaa-Naa is according to her. As Chernoff (1979) states it, "Africans use ritualized social arrangements to externalize and "objectify" their sense of a relationship because, if a relationship is to be meaningful to them, the recognition one person gives another must be outside their own private involvement. For example, in many African societies, a gift is obligatory as just such a visible token of recognition that people have become involved or have done something together, a display that acknowledges one person's participation in another's life and often initiates reciprocal responsibilities"<sup>47</sup>. When I went to visit the Gundo-Naa she gave me

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<sup>46</sup> Thompson, cited in Chernoff (1979) p.169

<sup>47</sup> Chernoff (1979) p. 161

four yams, and a visiting chief brought her 20 yams and a white fowl. Such gifts demonstrate her or his power over material goods, and further signals by this prosperity that all is well spiritually or morally within the chief's territory.

Prosperity is an important attribute to demonstrate to the village or state. Prosperity brings the "assurance of continuity", and in many ways the assurance of continuity is the reproductive aspect of the community. The title of Katchagu "Guineau Corn Harvest!" endows the Gundo-Naa with the image of plenty, and a junior but significant counterpart to the Yaa-Naa Sagimiana "Owner of All Food". Whereas the Yaa-Naa is the owner though, a father figure, the Gundo-Naa's title is motherly. She brings the milk of harvest to her children of the land, just as the Katariga tindana brings rain to the earth<sup>48</sup>.

#### **SECTION IV: Discussion of Women's Roles**

One of the largest problems of my study is that I often did not know what questions to ask in order to get the information I sought about how women exercise authority in the traditional society. It was only by the end of the third week of my month-long project that I began to feel like I was in a position to start the kind of focused and in depth questioning and probing which is needed for this sort of study. "Anthropologists should there for consider indigenous concepts carefully and recognize that the comprehensive study of power involves "all

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<sup>48</sup> If there is a drought and the elders ask the tindana to go to the dam for water then it will rain before she returns with her pail. Karim 19 Nov 97

conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances" (Weber 1947:153). This implies that the study of political relations involves more than the recognition that power is what power does. It also entails the recognition that power is how power means, and that interpretations may vary from place to place and time to time. Clastres (1987) made this point in stark terms when he observed that the model of political power usually used by social scientists is constituted within a Western cultural context, which then obscures the beliefs and experiences of those sought to be understood (p.16)<sup>49</sup>. These thoughts from Arens and Karp (1989) are a good point to start with our discussion of how gender is interposed on the chieftaincy. My Western context led me to look for what was not there, and miss the subtle indications in the culture. Dagomba women each contain an amazing variety of roles from the invariable mother, wife, daughter, sister, grandmother, trader, farmer and cook to the specialized healer, chief, priestess, "educated professional" and midwife or nurse. Each of these has their own qualities, their own set of expected behaviors and ways in which agency is exercised. The women I was working with and investigating were "powerful", feared for their African electronics. What is this power? I asked. Why do they have it? How did they come to get it? The answers to these sorts of questions (which I got to ask only to men) were cloudy, nervous because "Power is what power means". Simplistic perhaps, but the phrase serves as a way to begin to explore how the aura surrounding a role lends meaning to that role within its cultural setting.

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<sup>49</sup> Arens and Karp (1989) p. xv

To these men the juju power of these women meant that they had to be respected, even mildly feared, or the juju could be used against them, perhaps to "trap" them. Simmel (1950) comments that domination "is not so much the exploitation of the other as much as the mere consciousness of the possibility"<sup>50</sup>. Whether these women can be said to "dominate" others is, in the Western sense, questionable, but they are seen by others as having a definite potentiality to manipulate, harm, or otherwise exploit them. The women are said to possess these powers in order to protect their families, especially their eldest sons who may be eligible for certain skins because of the kinship status of the family<sup>51</sup>.

At the same time these women, who were all relatives of the Gundo-Naa and other chiefs, were also wives subordinate to the husband; and strong and unceasing workers providing for their families. As I wrote of earlier, when I acted within their norms, when I observed the formalities, I was able to gain a bit of space to participate freely. Within the parameters of the assumptions about men and women's roles, religious beliefs, kinship practices and social mores these women exercise their own brand of power. Just as culture is viewed differently from where each person stands, and shifts according to the time, so the type of power relationships which that person maintains with others changes too.

Dolphyne, in her 1991 treatise on "The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective" identifies three characteristics of women who command high respect within their communities. The first is royal women, the second is

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<sup>50</sup> Simmel (1950) in Arens and Karp (1989) p. xiv

<sup>51</sup> Issifu 29 Nov 97 . . .

professional women and the third are the shrewd businesswomen who may not be formally educated. The programmers initiated by the National Council on

Women and Development focused on income-earning activities as the way to reach the largest sector of the female population<sup>52</sup>. While I do believe that this extremely important and practical, I also wonder if the traditional belief system could be utilized more fully in order to advance the cause of women. In the introduction to a book entitled "Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies" (1989) the editors claim "Members of these societies [African] assert that the source of power resides in the interaction between natural, social and supernatural realms.... In many African social systems the exercise of political influence derives from access to and work upon the natural and supernatural spheres, both as the source of power to control others and as the legitimization for actions"<sup>53</sup>. The stories of Namkulma and Sebiri shows us these interactions at work. They have been remembered as agents of change, and possessors of authority. Sebiri particularly affected the politics of the chieftaincy for her own family's gain. Namkulma used juju as a way to treat witches. Although her motives are unknown (money, help for the women, elimination of evil) her juju legitimized her treatment of witches and perhaps other actions which would have otherwise been condoned.

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<sup>52</sup> DoIphyne (1991) pp.42-44

<sup>53</sup> Arens and Karp (1989) p. xvii

## CONCLUSION

The North, including Dagbon, provides fertile ground for further research since there is a wealth of oral history and little scholarly work done on it. There are many questions that I had to leave unanswered because of the short time frame and my lack of Dagbani. However, I hope that this paper can serve as introductory documentation of details and symbolism of the enskinment of the Gundo-Naa. The role of chieftaincy in Dagbon is partially elucidated by the history surrounding the skin and examples drawn from interview, observation and text. I conclude based on this that the ritual of enskinning a chief serves as a strong signal to the community about the importance of the chief and his/her relatives to their continued way of life. The chief is tied to his people by many social, religious, and economic bonds which stretch into history. These are manifested in the music and ceremony of the ritual. I was also pleased to see that a woman appears to have authority not only equal to that of a man, but able to veto him. Further research should be done on this type of traditional authority as it seems to be the domain of a certain group of women. These women possess juju in order to protect their sons and families who are eligible for chieftaincies. How the respect or fear for these women coexists with other attitudes I have observed which are not as respectful is still a paradox for me. There is a song, sung especially to young men, which says:

"Now of young girls/ Are like fresh fish

The earlier you cut it you then roll it/ Either than that, if it gets dry

When you want to roll it people will see you/ Then see your weakness"

This hints at the very different view of women than the one afforded by the respect Gundo-Naa and her relatives were given based on their social status and family connections, possession of juju, and age. Therefore, further research on which women possess juju and why they do so, and the perceptions towards these women would be very rewarding. It would also be interesting to learn simpa songs and analyze the lyrics, music and simpa experience in a village; or the current marriage practices and attitudes of young couples. All of these topics would reveal some of the patterns in relations between the sexes. There are currently a large number of NGO's working in Tamale and they include programs centered on women's development. They were an important resource which I had to leave untapped. Deeper research is needed on my topic of women and traditional authority in terms of what sorts of authority are exercised, how, by whom, and further implications of this in terms of how modernization is changing the role of the chief, especially the Gundogu chief, because it is now more important that the chiefs speak English, but less women than men do so. The present Gundo-Naa does not.

Tamale also brought another round of culture shock-- a new language, a multi-rhythmic pace to life, a stunning environment, and new codes of behavior such as squatting to show respect. Much of the data that I found brought out differences between Dagomba culture and my own (and even Akan culture). Americans are raised on the idea of equality, individuality and freedom, while Dagomba are socialized in the extended family hierarchy which privileges the assignment of role and the subsequent responsibility and degree of respect

which is afforded. The ways in which these differences were manifested to me as a participant in the culture were many and varied. I had to squat more deeply to the older than to the young, the man than the woman, more for the chief than the bread-seller.

However, these new stimuli are a large part of why I feel that my ISP experience was so valuable. Although there were crucial contacts made through the SIT program, I feel that given this experience I have more confidence in my ability to handle further travel, research or volunteer work than I would have had otherwise, and infinitely more interest in actually doing so. Every moment in Tamale was a moment "in the field", and at the end I had found a place that I really wish to return to. Even after Kat and Julie returned to Accra, I realized that I was not on my own there. I had friends to eat with and colleagues to work with. On my return to Accra I stopped to see my home-stay family in Kumasi. They welcomed me with open arms and again I felt that this was a place where I had let my whole self engage not with culture in any abstract sense, but with friends. This knowledge that fieldwork is infinitely more than collecting data is also why I include a conversation between Margaret Mead and James Baldwin about poetry as Appendix A. In my fieldwork I struggled with the poetics of life- the inexplicable joy of sunrise through the dawadawa tree, the fears that I would return with no "project", the paradoxes between what I was doing and where I came from. These are the things which are real to me. I was able to circuitously hone in on the Gundo-Naa because I began that investigation out of poetry, putting my whole self into it before I knew why, and so making the characters and places real.



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## APPENDIX A

Baldwin: What I am trying to say-- and I know we don't really disagree on this-- is that now in the 20th century we are going to find only two terrible facts: the fact of prose, on every single level from television to the White House, and the fact of the hope of poetry, without which nobody can live. I use poetry now in its most serious sense.... I'm talking about a certain kind of responsibility....and that is really toward the future, however mystical that may sound.

Mead: No, I agree.

Baldwin: One is a commitment to generations unborn. That is what it is all about. And I don't care what word one uses, poetry or prose. But I'm a poet.

Mead: Yes, but I'm not.

Baldwin: Oh, I don't agree with you. I don't think that's true. I think that you and I, for example have met and understand each other and are committed to each other because we really, no matter what the terms might be, have the same commitment. And that commitment is to the human race.

Mead: But I don't think that makes one a poet.

Baldwin: That is what makes you a poet.

From: Mead and Baldwin, Rap on Race cited by Nancy C. Lutkehaus (p. 199) in Women Writing Culture. (1995). Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon eds. Berkeley: University of California Press

Table 1: Comparative List of Past Gundo-Naa's

Abdel Samed	Alhaji Mahama	Nawona Yakuba	Gundogu Elders
Seidu (drummer)			
Zing Naa			
Namkulma	Namkulma: Naa		
Zengina			
Duhili	Sebiri: Naa Seguri		
Dahili	Asibi: Naa		
Mahami (Koringa)	~		
Ashetu Sebiri: Naa	Mimuna: Naa I		
Andani Kuba			
Gbembarga			
Adisa Kpema	-----	Adisa: Naa Kuba	
Adisa Bla	-----		
Lamihi	-----	Senna: Naa Abila	Senna
Budali	-----	Samata: Naa	Budali
Abila			
Naama Naama: Naa	Naama: Naa Kuba	Naama	
Abdulai Nabbieuw			
or Yakuba			
Chichere	Fatim Chichere	*****	Fatima Chichere
Samata Kpema	Samata: Naa	Samata Kpema:	Samata Kpema
Andani Naa Andani			
Samata Bla	-----	Samata Bla: Naa	Samata Bla
Andani			
Mina	Memuna: Naa	Amina: Naa	Amina
Alhassan	Alhassan		
Hasana Naama: Naa	Paana: Naa	Hasana	
Alhassan	Alhassan		
Suhlyugu	-----	Samata Dimama	-----
Awaa	Awaa: Naa Andani	Awaa: Naa Andani	Awaa
Abibata	Abiba: Naa	Abiba: Naa	Abiba (Lamihi)
Mahama Mahama			

Note: The differing fonts mean that I do not believe that these names represent the same person as the others in their row I obtained the history of the Gundonaa in pieces. While informants gave disparate early ancestors, the most recent were cited by all four of my sources. My sources were an interview with Nawona Yakuba, chief drummer in Yendi; Alhaji Mahama Seidu; Abdel Samed the "encyclopedia of Yendi history", and the Gundogu elders.

\*\*\*This absence is discussed below.



Photo 1. Participant observation at funeral in yendi. These gonji players also accompanied the enskinment.



Photo 2. Gbanzalin (standing left)  
Poses with Mama Yaa, myself, and  
Two women in her court-yard

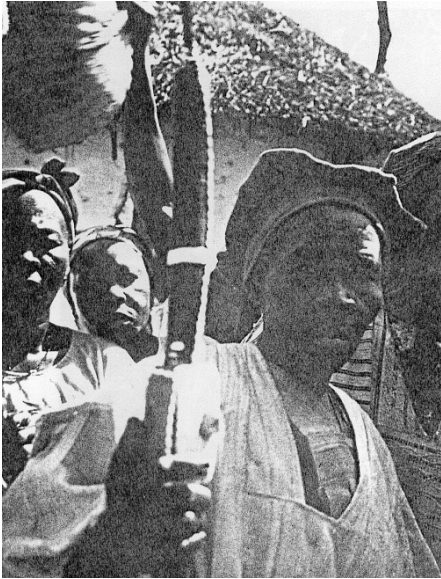


Photo 3. Gundo-Naa Abiba

Photo 4.

The Kpatu-Naa, Shillin-Naa, and Kulo-Naa on 14 Nov 97.

The Kpatu-Naa was Elevated to Gundo-Naa on 15 Nov 97. Note The Special Regalia including hat, head wrap, smock and shawl, and the Yodoya sticks in foreground.





Photo 5. In the crowd at the enskinment of the Gundo-Naa at the Yaa-Naa's palace.

Yendi 15 Nov 97 (photo: Saeed Idrisu)

Photo 6. The Chief Imams at the enskinment, representing the mixture of Islam and  
'traditional' belief. (photo: Saeed Idrisu)





Photo 7. The chief on her horse on route to Gundogu. Note her regalia and the drummer

Photo 8. The procession, showing the chiefs belongings, on the path to Gundogu





Photo 9. The Komlana, symbolic wife and carrier, in the procession to Gundogu.

Photo 10. The residents of Gundogu meet the Gundo-Naa's procession to ask her mission

